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C O N F I D E N T I A L   ROME 002874

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL KPAL TU IT EUN

SUBJECT: ITALY SAYS TURKEY WILL LIKELY DOMINATE SEPTEMBER

1-2 GYMNICHE

REF: A. STATE 153187

B. ROME 02720

C. ROME 01509

Classified By: Acting Political M/C Jonathan Cohen, for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

¶11. (C) Summary. On August 24, Poloff met separately with Sergio Mercuri of the MFA's EU office and Stefano Ravagnan of the MFA's Southern Europe office to discuss ref A demarche. Poloff also met with Raimondo De Cardona from the MFA's Balkans office on August 29. Mercuri and Ravagnan stated that Italy's position heading into the COREPER and Gymnich track closely with the points provided ref A. Italy will stay the course on fully supporting Turkey's bid to join the EU. Israel's pullout of Gaza is a positive step but new Israeli settlements could hinder progress on the roadmap. Italy is hoping that Iraqi authorities can keep to the timetable for the referendum and elections following the announcement of a draft constitution. Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro bear watching during the next six months as key political events come to a head. End Summary.

Turkey

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¶12. (C) Mercuri and Ravagnan said Italy continues to strongly support accession negotiations for Turkey without preconditions (see also ref B). According to Ravagnan, who served for four years in Turkey in the late 1990s, Italy's support for Turkey cuts across party lines (with minor reservations at the political fringes), and Italian policy in that regard is managed from the top. Prime Minister Berlusconi relies heavily on personal connections with world leaders, Ravagnan said, and he maintains a strong personal connection with Turkish PM Erdogan. (In 2003, Berlusconi was a witness at the wedding of one of Erdogan's sons.)

¶13. (C) Italy has consistently maintained that Turkey has the right to be a part of the EU and that Ankara's eligibility should be considered on its own merits. Italy is headed into EU negotiations confident that the final goal is full membership for Turkey, according to Ravagnan--there were no other alternatives envisaged in the December 2004 European Council declaration. He added that Italy would continue to champion Turkey's cause because having another major Mediterranean country in the Union is politically and economically important for Italy.

¶14. (C) Ankara's declaration rejecting recognition of Cyprus was not helpful and was ill-timed, Ravagnan acknowledged, but it was done for domestic reasons and should not be over dramatized. He said within the EU, Italy is counseling a "constructive and flexible" approach to Turkey, with no linkage between accession talks and Turkey's recognition of Cyprus. Nicosia will certainly demand some type of EU "counter-declaration" either at the August COREPER or later, but will probably only get a mild statement on the issue. Ravagnan advised that, although Cyprus is free to exploit the matter, it should be careful not to become a single-issue country that will quickly lose credibility in the EU.

¶15. (C) Ravagnan suggested that Turkey's future is in Erdogan's hands and he was confident the Turkish Prime Minister will be able to "pass something" on Cyprus that will satisfy the EU, although likely not before October 3. Turkish public opinion on Cyprus, he said, makes it too difficult for Erdogan to change direction just before the October start date. Once Turkey begins down the accession path, Ravagnan added, Ankara will find it difficult to break off negotiations and will seek ways to work with the EU. Domestic anticipation of eventual accession (especially if chapter negotiations proceed relatively smoothly) will be a great motivating factor for Turkey. Ravagnan did not foresee any surprises before October and dismissed the likelihood that some members might veto or block the start of negotiations.

Middle East/Gaza

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¶16. (C) Mercuri, who just arrived from the Italian Embassy in Washington, agreed that Israel's withdrawal from Gaza was a

significant milestone and said Italy was in general agreement with USG views on the way forward. On the specifics regarding EU or EC assistance, Mercuri warned that the Gymnich is not a decision-making body and that the most we could expect is a signal of members' willingness to continue the momentum of the past few weeks. The EU, as part of the Quartet, continues to support the roadmap strategy and Italy will continue lobbying all sides to maintain that process.

Iraq

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17. (C) Mercuri said Italy hopes the Iraqis will be able to maintain the timetable for a constitutional referendum in October and elections in December. Mercuri acknowledged that it was unclear whether the EU would come up with funding or staff for the elections, but offered that something could be coaxed out of the EU's CFSP office. At this time, Italy is not considering any bilateral aid.

Western Balkans

18. (C) On Kosovo, De Cardona estimated that Special Envoy Kai Eide's comprehensive review would be released sometime in September and perhaps coincide with the UNGA. At the same time, De Cardona believed Eide would delay releasing the report if his conclusions about the current state of standards implementation were largely negative. In that case, Eide may release a simple status report noting what further steps must be taken to meet the standards. De Cardona said Italy believes that the fundamental solution for Kosovo is future EU membership, but there is a long road ahead and it will be difficult to convince some EU members skeptical of further enlargement.

19. (C) De Cardona said that dealing with Bosnia is more complicated, where relatively minor issues such as police and public broadcasting reforms threaten to block continued progress. The Bosnians must overcome these obstacles before the EU will agree to open negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement. Italy, according to De Cardona, is willing to consider initiating negotiations with the stipulation that the police and broadcasting reform issues will be solved before an agreement is signed. De Cardona noted that High Rep Ashdown takes a harder line, loathe to be seen as giving in to Bosnian intransigence. De Cardona made another pitch for Laura Mirachian as Italy's candidate to succeed Ashdown (see ref C) and wondered aloud about the USG position on her candidacy.

10. (C) De Cardona said Italy fully supports the current Serbia and Montenegro union but understands that Montenegro has a fundamental right to call a referendum on independence if that is the public will. However, the international community should closely monitor the situation and possibly flex its muscle if it appears that President Djukanovic will call a referendum next spring. The timing of a referendum will be crucial, said De Cardona, because next year many events related to Kosovo, Bosnia, etc., will be coming to a head; a Montenegro referendum will only complicate matters. What will we do with Montenegro as an independent country? De Cardona asked rhetorically. It has no democratic tradition and no viable economy. Serbia's reaction also could be worrisome. Independence for Montenegro must be managed correctly to ensure that it does not spiral out of control, De Cardona advised. Montenegro has a history of involvement in trafficking; immediate freedom could open the door to smugglers and create a haven for terrorists willing to exploit the void.

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